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RESEARCH

AND

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT*

(L. W. Downey)

My starting point is a very simple assumption: that research in the social sciences could and should, in future, play a much more significant role than it has played in the past, in the shaping of social policy at all levels.

That simple assumption generates a host of difficult questions: What is the essence of the social policy process? At what points in the process is intervention possible? What are the appropriate strategies of intervention? What role does knowledge play? What forms of knowledge? Hence, what forms of research?

Consideration of these and other related questions has led me to undertake (perhaps naively) to explore with you today an extremely vast territory. Indeed, the territory is so vast that you must expect little more than a general and cursory exploration. In fact, my purpose shall be simply to attempt to map the territory -- not to explore any of its specific features in detail.

Let me begin with a brief foretaste -- a bird's-eye-view of the territory.

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I. OVERVIEW

There are just seven major points to my thesis. The first five are quite preliminary; the sixth is evaluative and judgmental; the seventh is something of a prescription and a prognostication.

1. The process of social policy development may be conceived as a three phase cycle, involving: (1) policy-making or legislation; (2) policy-execution or implementation; and (3) policy evaluation or recipient reaction.

2. In government, the three phases of the process are handled, typically, by the politician, the bureaucrat, and the electorate, respectively.

3. At each phase in the cycle, the bases of action have traditionally been political intuition, precedent, experience and judgment. (With, of course, a bit of good fortune for some -- misfortune for others).

4. Recently, some efforts have been made to feed knowledge into the process in an effort to make it more rational.

5. These efforts have taken many forms, the most representative of which are: (1) information and research offices; (2) planning bureaus; and (3) various kinds of feed-back systems.

6. (My judgment). But these efforts have been fragmentary, over-lapping, and uncoordinated; methods and measures have not been standardized. As a consequence, the impact has been minimal. Furthermore, they have been "after the fact" assessments -- seldom anticipatory.

7. (My prognostication). What appears to be emerging is a new and more significant role for research in the process of public policy development. This new role is embodied in a conception of a comprehensive information service made up of the following components:

(i) Coordinated systems of social accounting --- whose purpose it is to monitor on-going events and conditions in society.

(ii) A federated data-storage system --- with standardized methods of collection, coding, storage and retrieval.

(iii) National, provincial and regional stand-by research capabilities --- whose purpose it is to "take readings" on unanticipated changes and their probable social consequences.

(iv) Expanded and improved systems of feed-back technology. (Cybernetics).

(v) Development programs to assist legislators in translating new knowledge into social policies and to assist practitioners in translating new policies into action.

My intention is to attempt to expand and illustrate each of these points. Unfortunately, however, each is of such a magnitude that I shall find it difficult to be anything but cursory in this brief treatment.

II. THE PROCESS OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Whether it takes place at the federal, the provincial or the local level, whether it is in the public or the private sector, whether it is an individual or a group activity --- the process of policy development may be viewed as a tri-dimensional process.

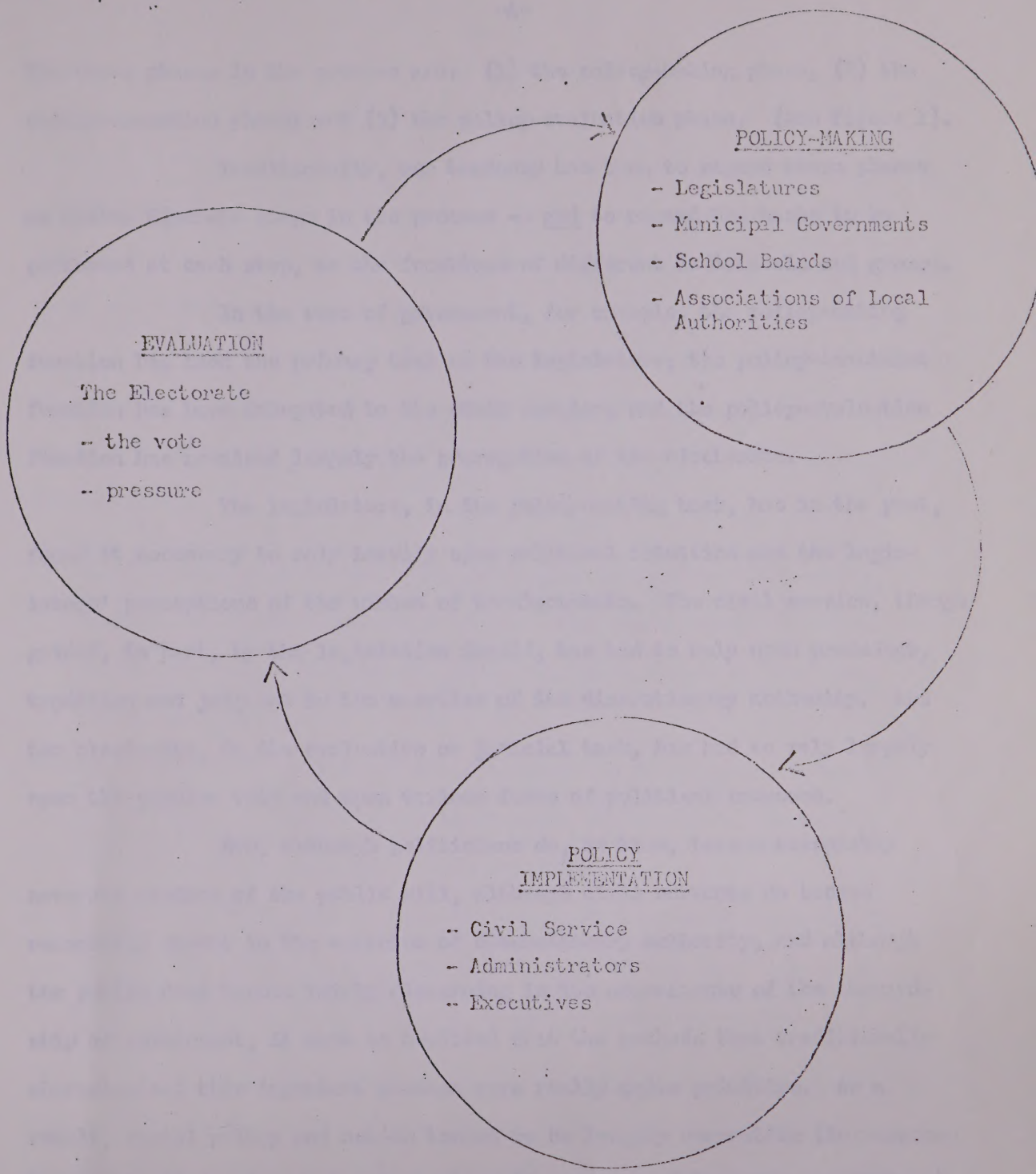


FIGURE 1: THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The three phases in the process are: (1) the policy-making phase; (2) the policy-execution phase; and (3) the policy-evaluation phase. (See Figure 1).

Traditionally, our tendency has been to regard these phases as rather discrete steps in the process -- and to regard the tasks to be performed at each step, as the functions of different individuals and groups.

In the case of government, for example, the policy-making function has been the primary task of the legislature; the policy-enactment function has been delegated to the civil service; and the policy-evaluation function has remained largely the prerogative of the electorate.

The legislature, in its policy-making task, has in the past, found it necessary to rely heavily upon political intuition and the legislators' perceptions of the wishes of the electorate. The civil service, though guided, in part, by the legislation itself, has had to rely upon precedent, tradition and judgment in the exercise of its discretionary authority. And the electorate, in its evaluative or judicial task, has had to rely largely upon the popular vote and upon various forms of political pressure.

Now, although politicians do, in time, become reasonably accurate readers of the public will, although civil servants do become reasonably expert in the exercise of discretionary authority, and although the public does become fairly discerning in its assessments of the stewardship of government, it must be admitted that the methods that traditionally characterized this important process were really quite primitive. As a result, social policy and action tended to be largely corrective (in response to social maladies) -- not anticipatory (in advance of impending conditions).

III. SOME RECENT TRENDS

Recently, as governments (and other organizations) have increased in size and complexity, the realization has dawned that something ought to be done to make the process of policy development more efficient. The realization has dawned, too, that the missing ingredient in the process, as it had functioned, was knowledge.

As a result, we have witnessed, in recent years, the initiation of a variety of plans calculated to make the process of policy development more rational and more "scientific." Some of those early efforts, included the following:

1. University-based, government or industry-sponsored research projects. Usually these were ad hoc. Typically, the purpose was to describe, to evaluate and to recommend. Seldom did they involve follow-up or involvement in the recommended change. And almost never were such projects coordinated with anything like a programmed, comprehensive research endeavor. Furthermore, little effort was made to evaluate, to assess the impact of new policies, or to monitor the process of policy enactment.

2. Government department-based research agencies or bureaus. Usually, these were continuing rather than ad hoc. Typically they were small and, hence, had minimal stand-by research capabilities. Inevitably, they were narrowly problem-oriented and, hence, contributed little to the mainstream of accumulating knowledge.

3. Government, University or Foundation-sponsored projects initiated by individuals or groups. Typically these were theory-based. Though they could, and often did, contribute significantly to knowledge in specific domains, they seldom had much of an impact upon policy or practice; indeed, they tended to broaden the gap between what was known and what was done.

In summary, most of these early efforts to bring research to bear on the process of social policy development tended to be fragmentary, uncoordinated, single-disciplined, and of minimal significance.

Most recently, however, other kinds of research agencies have emerged. Examples of these more recent thrusts are as follows:

1. Anticipatory Research Agencies. Typically, these are continuing (as opposed to ad hoc) agencies. Their function is to predict needs and conditions in society and alert policy-makers and the public of impending social conditions and the need for policy revisions. The following agencies tend to fall into this category:

Example I: Information and Analysis Branch of Canada Manpower. This agency gathers data regarding: (1) Labour force by province and sex, (2) Unemployment by province and sex, (3) Requests for workers by province and sex, (4) Requests for jobs by province and sex, (5) Individuals in training, (6) Immigration, (7) Job vacancies, and (8) Labour supply and demand. In addition, the Branch now seems prepared to move into studies of more subtle determiners of manpower gaps such as cultural determiners, industrial trends and the impact of retraining.

Example II: Studies of the American Academy of Arts and Science of the probable social consequences of the American Space Program. This Agency is attempting to determine what social trends may have been set in motion by the space program (and other aspects of the technological revolution) and predict the consequent state of society in years to come.

Example III: Educational Planning Offices.

2. Social Accounting Agencies. These too are stand-by. Their function is to monitor and evaluate changes and to provide feed-back to the policy machine.

Example: The Economic Council of Canada. This agency gathers data on: (1) Employment, population and labour, (2) Economic growth, (3) Price, (4) Balance of payments, (5) Income and consumer expenditure, (6) Investment, (7) Housing, and (8) Government expenditures, and (9) Other forms of economic data. With these data, the agency calculates a series of indicies which express, in comparative terms, the economic state of society.

3. Developmental Agencies. The function of these agencies is to promote needed change -- to implement policies on a planned basis.

Example: The Agricultural Rehabilitation Development Act (ARDA). This is a federal-provincial program of social and economic development. The programs have some intriguing aspects: (1) The division of territory into "new", more natural regions, (2) A searching-out of leaders, legitimizers, to help gain acceptance, (3) The identification of local resources, (4) The establishment of local policy committees, (5) The training of local implementers and, (6) The establishment of communication devices.

4. Multi-Purpose Agencies. Some of these do both anticipatory and stock-taking types of research, as well as development, in a single field (education); others do all kinds of research and development in broader fields (Human Resources).

Example I: Regional Laboratories and R and D Centres in the United States.

Example II: Educational Research Institutes in Canada (O.I.S.E.).

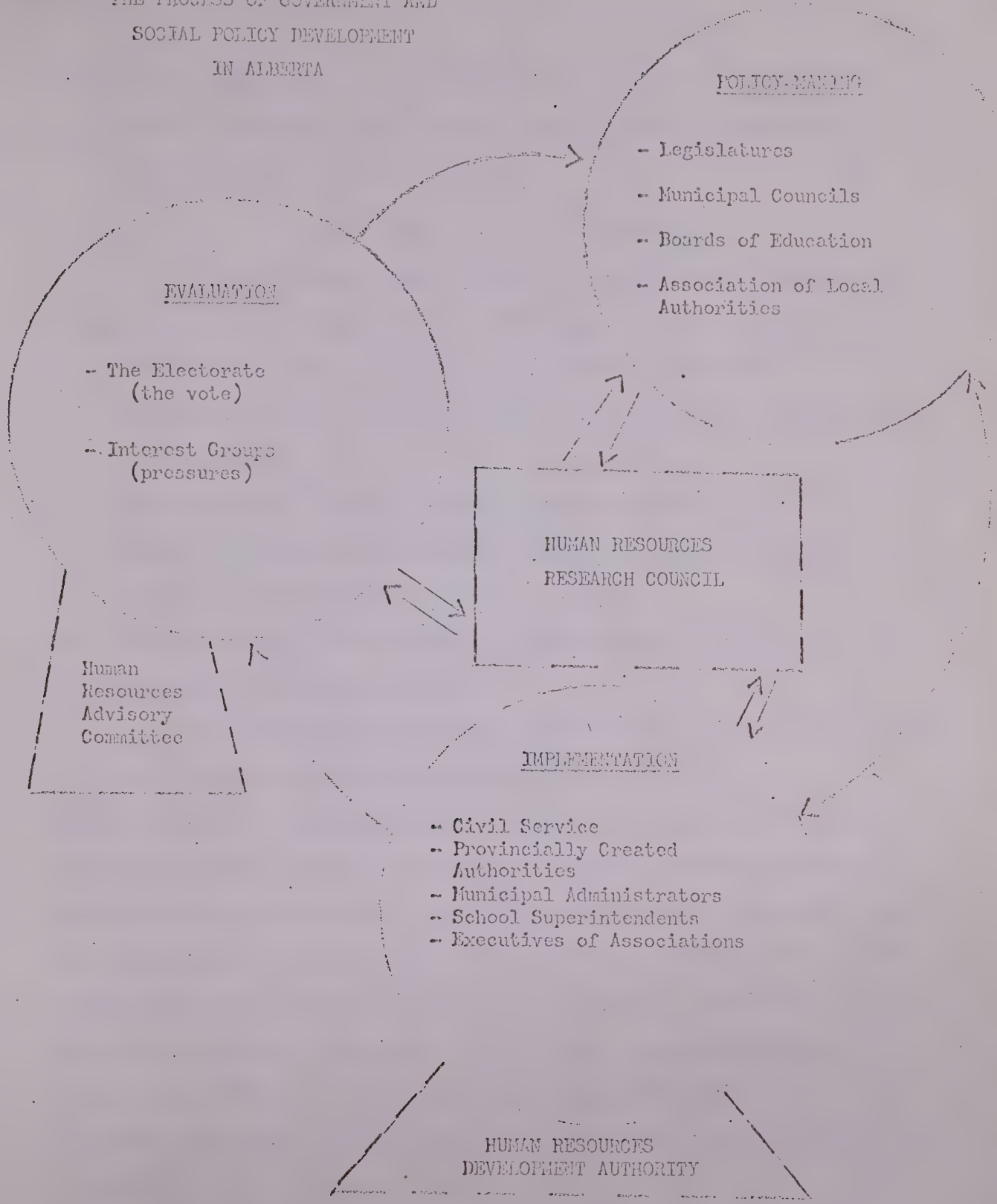
Example III: Alberta's new master-plan in human resources. This plan features the creation of three new agencies -- each designed to improve certain aspects of the policy cycle. The position of these new agencies with respect to the policy cycle is illustrated in Figure 2. Another significant (though not necessarily or authentically desirable) feature of the Alberta plan is that it is broadly based and multi-faceted (human resources) in contrast to more narrowly based, single-purpose agencies (education, welfare, etc.).

Though most of these recent developments do appear to constitute a major step forward, they too have their shortcomings:

1. There is still far more duplication of effort than we can afford; this happens because one research agency is seldom aware of what is taking place in others.
2. Research efforts are still far too fragmented; hence what "evidence" we have is far to inconclusive (sometimes contradictory) to be very useful in policy development.

FIGURE 1:

THE PROCESS OF GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN ALBERTA



3. There is still far too great a distance between those who attempt to discover new knowledge and those who attempt to use knowledge in the making and enactment of social policy.

IV. THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

In my opinion, these shortcomings point to five specific needs: (these, of course, in addition to the continuing need for accumulating knowledge through fundamental, theory-based research in all domains)

1. Federated systems of social accounting -- to monitor on-going events and conditions in society.
2. Federated systems of data collection, storage and retrieval.
3. National, provincial, and regional, stand-by research capabilities -- for studying unanticipated events and conditions.
4. Systems of rapid feed-back to serve social agencies.
5. Appropriate programs of development.

Let me attempt to elaborate each of these, in turn, and indicate what must come to pass before they can become realities:

Social Accounting. In pointing to the need for improvement in the art (or science) of social accounting, I am suggesting that it may be possible to monitor on-going social events in much the same way as economists have learned to monitor economic events. To do this would be to take stock of the social state of society in precisely the same way as economists now take-stock of the economic state of the nation. I do not offer a ready-made scheme for social stock-taking. Nor do I suggest that the development of such a scheme would be an easy task. But it seems to me that one might speculate about such possibilities as:

(i) The development of a comprehensive conception of a society -- one that would suggest areas for which indicators would have to be developed.

(ii) The development of both quantitative and qualitative measures which could be used with considerable ease by a team of trained data gatherers.

(iii) The development of indices or standards. (This is suggestive of a problem which may be insurmountable: the establishment of norms implies value judgments and consensus. And consensus on values on such a scale, probably implies the fixing of social goals -- a difficult task. But surely some kinds of criteria could be agreed upon).

(iv) The development of social "profiles" which would make it possible to draw comparisons and to monitor the pace of social change.

Federated Systems of Data Collection, Storage and Retrieval. To make this idea a reality, it would be necessary simply to develop standard methods of collection and coding and to engineer the kind of inter-institutional (or national) linkages that would make sharing easy and instantaneous. We have the technology; all we need is the will. (There are several indications that this movement is already underway. I understand that a special committee is now developing a plan of an education information system to serve the ten provinces. I understand, also, that the Dominion Bureau of Statistics is now exploring, with various provincial agencies, the possibility of "sharing" data in a more systematic way and of collecting data in a form more useful to other agencies).

Stand-by Research Capabilities. If an accurate and valid system of social accounting is ever developed, it seems clear that the system itself will need to be carefully monitored and adjusted as conditions change and as techniques improve. Hence, the need for what has been called a "stand-by research capacity" whose purpose it would be:

1. To engage in a continuing search for better monitoring techniques.
2. To do special studies of unanticipated events and conditions.
3. To conduct depth studies of observed phenomena in an attempt to uncover causal relationships and to make qualitative assessments.

Such stand-by research forces could be in single fields (such as education) or comprehensive (such as human resources). But in either case, they should be multi-disciplinary. And to serve the proper function, timing would be important; so they ought to be "stand-by" capacities in the true sense of the term.

Systems of Rapid Feedback. The science of cybernetics is essentially the science of control, of communication, of feedback -- or of "steersmanship". I shall not bore you with my lack of knowledge of this complex science; I introduce the subject, because it seems to be based upon a set of relatively simple premises which may be appropriate to this discussion . Some of these premises are:

1. In dynamic systems, it cannot be assumed that, while one part is being treated, changed or even studied, all other parts will stand still.
2. Intuition is an inadequate basis for predicting shifts in a complex system.

3. When things change with time, even by infinitesimal steps, the resultant is "difference". And as "differences" become greater and greater they eventually become observable and measurable.

4. When the steps in change are observed, counted, or measured, a trend begins to emerge.

5. To be aware of emerging trends and conditions is to be in possession of important information, potential feedback.

6. To use feedback systematically to control or influence the system is to engage in "steersmanship" of the sort that is badly needed in the Social Policy domain.

These very simple, but fundamental concepts are at the heart of an adequate feedback system.

In brief, what is advocated here are mechanisms for monitoring organizations and their environments and for systematically using the information gleaned to "steer" the organization on its course.

Progress of Development. The relationship between theory and practice, between knowledge and the use of knowledge, is, I understand to receive special attention at another session in this conference. I shall use that fact as an excuse for giving only brief and superficial attention to what may well be the most difficult problem of all. May I offer just a few speculations:

Early efforts to reduce the gap between knowledge available and knowledge used were patterned on what I would call a simple "engineering model". The notion was that if the discoverers of new knowledge would only communicate with the users of knowledge, practice would follow along rather automatically. But programs of change, based upon this model, tended to be unsuccessful. Indeed, as the tempo of research accelerated, the gap broadened, despite the

best efforts of developers.

A more recent model, which I would call a "clinical model", is essentially an extension -- inasmuch as it simply includes more intervening processes between discovery and use. (Inventions, involvement, demonstration, dissemination and so on). Many programs based upon this model appear also, however, to be in difficulty. I would hazzard the guess that this is so, in part, because the process (in the hands of some developers) often becomes so blatantly manipulative and, in part, because it is so often entirely process-oriented -- to the exclusion of product development.

A still more recent model, which has been called "the experimental social innovation" model, is distinct in that it does, in fact, merge the process of discovery with the process of use. That is to say, persons charged with the adoption of new practices are involved also in the discovery of the new products to be used. (Good Brunerians ought to find this particular approach rather attractive!)

V: IN CONCLUSION

In the preparation of a paper which is as general as this, one always finds it difficult to specify the exact source of one's ideas. In the preparation of a paper which is as speculative as this, one is always reluctant to share the responsibility with his colleagues. It was for both these reasons that I refrained from using any kind of documentation or references.

You, however, who are my listeners (presumably), have undoubtedly recognized ideas (however distorted) that I have borrowed from other persons. May I conclude by simply acknowledging all such contributions, with thanks.